TEACHING REPORT

Class Matters: Teaching about Class in U.S. Higher Education
— Joe Bandy, and Brielle Harbin

Joe Bandy, Interim Director and Principal Senior Lecturer, Center for Teaching and Department of Sociology, Vanderbilt University, joe.bandy@vanderbilt.edu

Brielle Harbin, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, United States Naval Academy, harbin@usna.edu

Abstract:

Teaching about class in U.S. higher education is challenging because of the many ways American society insulates class experiences and undermines, obscures, or delegitimizes class consciousness. Yet, educators have developed innovative strategies to empower students to understand historical and social structures of class as it manifests in everyday life. We explore here the challenges of and strategies for teaching class using methods that include a faculty survey, participant observations from an instructor learning community on class in the university classroom, as well as insights from the research on teaching and learning. Based on this, we identify and discuss the primary challenges and opportunities of teaching class. We find that, although there are many critical pedagogies supporting student class consciousness, educators frequently favor cognitive strategies, which focus on students' conceptual gaps, over affective strategies that engage their emotional and interpersonal growth, limiting transformations in our students and in our society.

Keywords:

teaching and learning, pedagogy, class, social class, higher education, inequality, socio-economic status

Introduction

Class is a challenging concept for both students and instructors to understand. Confusion often arises because class — something we may define simply as the social distribution of capital, wealth, power, and status — is the product of a complex web of economic and cultural forces shaping every dimension of our history, society, and consciousness. Yet, despite its ubiquity, class is often invisible (hooks 1994, Kunkel 2018), the elephant in the room that we often fail to see because of more salient intersecting differences, and/or belief systems that – like Marx's "camera obscura" (1845) – obfuscate, diminish, or delegitimize class as a concept. When representations of economic inequality render class more visible, as in popular film or television, it is often merely as a facade without a corresponding edifice of critique, a construct of cultural or psychological conceptions of difference without consideration of the historical, structural, or material systems that produce it. This may be, in part, because when we probe issues of class at this level it can lead to fearsome realizations about the injustices and dysfunctions of our social systems, raising questions about our own complicity and subverting our presumption of a more just world. Rigorous class critique asks us to consider the division of labor and power that undergirds our institutions, our ideologies, and our identities. Precisely because of its elemental role in our lives, class is difficult to confront. Even those who see and wish to challenge class structures can find the scale of the problems daunting and structural change patently unimaginable or impractical. Therefore, simply understanding class, much less transforming it, requires a profound intellectual openness and criticality so that we may come to terms with its manifestations in everyday life: the material and cultural, the political and personal, the historical and social, the rational and moral, the tragic and farcical, the intellectual and the emotional, just to name a few.

Given this, what guiding principles and pedagogical strategies should instructors use to facilitate student learning related to class? In this article, we answer this

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question using data from three sources. First, we surveyed faculty who teach issues of class at a private research-intensive university. Second, we draw on participant-observations from a faculty learning community on teaching class at the same institution. Lastly, we incorporate a literature review of existing scholarship on teaching and learning to discuss in greater depth the challenges and promising practices of teaching class. While the authors represent the disciplines of sociology and political science, our survey respondents and the scholars from our literature review represent a wide array of fields, ensuring that our findings are relevant to a variety of disciplines.

Our findings reveal complex and overlapping challenges of teaching class, as well as innovative strategies faculty use to meet them. Faculty repeatedly articulated three primary challenges to teaching class: students' simplistic preexisting definitions of class (e.g., as merely an identity, not a social system), teaching students from radically different class positions and experiences, and helping students adopt an intersectional understanding of class that simultaneously addresses race, gender, sexuality, and other differences. Interestingly, while there are many critical pedagogies supporting student growth in this area (e.g., Haltinner and Hormel, 2018), when articulating solutions to these challenges, faculty in our survey most often incorporated strategies aimed at students' *cognitive development* (e.g., conceptual gaps) and secondarily, strategies addressing students' *affective development* (e.g., emotional and interpersonal growth). Consequently, we conclude that instructors display innovation and commitment to developing their students' conceptual understandings of class. However, they also can struggle to empower students to see how class operates in their everyday personal lives, to grapple with the emotional challenges students confront around class identity, to negotiate class conflicts in their social relationships, or to develop their own ethical values as citizens and whether or how to challenge class relations and social inequalities. We will not argue that attending to students' affective learning is the sole or even highest responsibility of faculty, nor that faculty have sufficient training or time to support all the emotional needs of our students. Rather, we contend that inattention to the affective dimension of learning can hinder students' class analysis, and a comprehension of the lived social and emotional complexities of class consciousness. Students, therefore, enter their post-graduate lives less empowered to challenge or dismantle class injustice, whether it is at work, at home, or in the public sphere.

Methods

Case Study

We have chosen one university as a case study for exploring the challenges and promises of teaching social class—a highly ranked private research-intensive institution located in the U.S. South with over 7,000 undergraduates and 1,400 non-medical faculty (University 2020).

The university *is* and *is not* representative of American higher education when it comes to class issues. Like any other U.S. higher education institution, it is the product of a society thoroughly constituted by class differences and therefore often functions to reproduce class hierarchies even as many of its faculty seek greater equality (Mullen 2010; Shavit 2007). Most colleges and universities imagine themselves to be, in the words of Horace Mann, "the great leveler," institutions through which anyone can accrue the necessary knowledge or skills (cultural capital) and networks (social capital) to find success in the labor market and a ticket to class mobility (e.g., Laqueur & Mosse, 1967). Our research site represents this ethos in its stated commitments to creating a more diverse student body and faculty, and to realizing a campus and academic life that honors principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity. This is evident in its continuing efforts to recruit and develop faculty and students, to build administrative infrastructure focused on equity, and to diversify its curricular and co-curricular programs. Its financial aid policies have enabled the university to have a more economically and socially diverse student body and has initiated a significant transformation of its campus culture. For first-generation and lower-SES students, the institution works to provide a culture of acceptance and inclusion, resources for academic support, career development, and inclusive teaching. More generally, its curriculum, like other institutions, exposes students to liberal arts traditions and professional education through which they often acquire critical understandings of class as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure their own class advancement. Indeed, it ranks highly among 64 selective universities in the share of students from the bottom 20% of the income distribution who move into the top 20% as adults (Aisch et al., 2017).

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However, much of U.S. higher education simultaneously functions as a class sorting mechanism insofar as it disproportionately confers cultural and social capital to students who already hold greater class privilege, contributing to the reconstitution of class hierarchies in each generation. Across the U.S., 54.2% of all undergraduates come from the top 25% of the socioeconomic distribution (Aisch et al., 2017; DOE in Lederman, 2018), overrepresenting the professional middle or upper classes. This university, like its highly ranked private peers, has tended to admit and graduate a disproportionate number of students from privileged class backgrounds, as evidenced by the widely circulated research of Chetty et al. (2017), which revealed that nearly three quarters of the students came from the top quintile of the national income distribution, and almost a quarter coming from the top one percent (Aisch et al., 2017). While the administration has worked to diversify the student body further since this research, it continues to be representative of much of private higher education, and the students have raised concerns about the way class-based and other hierarchies shape campus life.

This university and its class dynamics are not dissimilar to those at many other institutions of higher education across the U.S., and therefore we expect our findings to be representative of the challenges and opportunities of teaching class at other colleges and universities. However, the university does not have the class demographics or curriculum as, say, community colleges or many public schools, and therefore faculty experiences may speak to the unique context of private well-resourced research-intensive locations. For example, the combination of, on the one hand, financial aid programs that have diversified the classes represented within the student population, and on the other, the lasting legacies of privileged social networks on campus, make private universities like that in our case study particularly contentious sites for students and faculty engaged in issues of class inequality. These and other factors—student body size, faculty-student ratios, private or public governance, educational mission, and campus culture, to name a few—may vary considerably across different higher education contexts, something we acknowledge openly below when relevant.

Data Collection

We adopted a three-fold approach to studying the challenges and opportunities for teaching class. First, we administered a survey in the Spring of 2018 to all instructors teaching courses with titles or descriptions addressing issues of class identity, stratification, inequality, and movements, as identified from the course catalog and faculty specialties noted online. The total sample of instructors receiving our Redcap survey numbered 75. We received 29 completed survey responses (39% response rate). The survey asked course instructors 12 open-ended questions about the greatest challenges of teaching class and the strategies and techniques faculty use to meet them (available upon request). The qualitative responses we then collected and analyzed using conceptual content analysis, which allowed us to measure the existence and frequency of constructs in the texts, and how they relate to the respondents' previous answers and teaching contexts (e.g., Sabharwal et al., 2018). We identified common themes for each question's responses and then grouped all responses into the themes to assess which responses were prevalent.

Second, we collected participant-observations from a faculty and graduate student learning community hosted by the university's Center for Teaching and Learning, which explored issues related to teaching social class and supporting students from first-generation and lower income backgrounds. This learning community took place during the 2016-17 academic year. Approximately 20 faculty members and 10 graduate students regularly attended the 90-minute monthly meetings in which participants discussed readings, teaching experiences, and pedagogy. During these gatherings, we took notes on the issues raised by participants as well as insights offered. We incorporate these insights to further contextualize—and when relevant, *amplify*—responses offered in our faculty survey.

Third, we incorporated a thorough literature review of topics related to pedagogy and social class in U.S. higher education. Below, rather than providing a separate summary of our literature review, we have incorporated insights from it into our findings to place the teaching experiences of our study's participants into dialogue with the literature on teaching class, amplifying, informing, and at times, raising questions about their teaching.

Lastly, it is important to note that our methods entail no direct assessment of student learning, say, through pre- or post-tests of student knowledge or a review

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of student work. Any claims we make about student learning, therefore, are derived from faculty reflections on what has been effective in their teaching experience.

Participant Characteristics

The 29 instructors who participated in our survey embody a variety of traits and roles. First, they represented various ranks and schools, but an overwhelming majority (27) came from colleges with disciplines in the social sciences and humanities where class is a subject of study. A narrow majority of 15 participants were tenured faculty, seven were Assistant Professors on the tenure track, and the remaining seven were non-tenure track faculty. As such, among the respondents there is great experience teaching issues of class, with 15 having taught 10 or more courses on the subject, and another 10 having taught at least four. Notably, most of the courses that the respondents teach include class as merely one of several issues of inequality or difference.

Regarding participants' demographic characteristics, 23 self-identified as White, two as Black, three as Asian or Asian American, and one as American Indian or Alaskan Native. With respect to gender, 15 identified as women, 14 as men, and none as non-binary. Interestingly, unlike their students, faculty respondents are more representative of the U.S. class distribution, with only three coming from families with an income of $200,000 or more, while nine came from families with less than $50,000 (closest to the U.S. median of $56,310 in 2020), and 10 participants falling in between (US BLS, 2020).

While we did not collect demographic data from the learning community participants, they were similar in most respects to the survey respondents, since they were evenly distributed across cis-gender categories and there was a high proportion of more experienced, white faculty who openly identified as first-generation and/or low-income students. The only significant difference in the learning community was the involvement of graduate student instructors who represented approximately half of the participants, but who were, likewise, predominantly white, first-generation, or low-income.

Instructors' socio-economic backgrounds were salient for many survey respondents and learning community participants as evident in their frequent references to

personal interests in "giving back" by supporting first-generation or lower-income students. This relationship between their class-based academic interests and their identity may not be coincidental, since instructor identity has profound impacts on intellectual affinities, chosen expertise, senses of self-efficacy and authority, relations with students and colleagues, overall satisfaction in academia (Chesler & Young, 2007), emotional difficulties during professionalization (Jones, 1998), and often, critical pedagogical approaches to empowering students and promoting social justice (Taylor et al., 2000). This said, it is not lost on us as researchers the fact that there was little racial and ethnic diversity among the participants. Indeed, these demographic characteristics point to a common issue that arises when discussing differences like class: those who show up are often among the more privileged members of our class system's many Others." after "(US BLS, 2020).

Findings: The Challenges of Teaching Class

In response to questions about the principal challenges of teaching class, participants' responses fell into three predominant themes: (1) challenges instructors confront complicating students' preexisting simplistic understandings of class, (2) teaching students from fundamentally different class backgrounds, and (3) adopting an intersectional approach to class studies. In this section, we discuss each challenge in turn, drawing on the voices and experiences of our survey respondents, learning community members, as well as existing scholarship.

Challenge 1: Complicating Student Notions of Class

Faculty from the survey cited several preconceptions of class common among their students, ones uninformed by empirical studies and intellectual debates surrounding class, and sometimes resistant to change. First, several mentioned that students' understandings of class conformed in some form to Feagin's "gospel of individualism" (1975); that is, they believed one's class status and life chances are ultimately a product of free individual choices, especially dedication to hard work or education, and not social forces (see also, Andrews, 2013; Coghlan & Huggins, 2004; Davis, 1992). As one faculty member put it, "I believe that many students believe that class is determined by effort and intelligence, rather than

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by systemic inequalities in the US. For example, many students attribute wealth to skill and acumen rather than to privilege, and poverty to 'laziness' or some other 'fault.'" Another respondent was more succinct: "[my challenge is] teaching to a majority of students who were born on third [base] and think they hit a triple" (borrowing from Texas politician, Jim Hightower's 1988 reference to George H.W. Bush). Indeed, some respondents noted that their more privileged students, like many Americans generally, believe in a social order that is consistent with the dominant ideology of the nation—McNamee's and Miller's (2009) "myth of meritocracy"—one in which our socio-economic system justly awards individual hard work with success and status. This can lead some students to articulate, intentionally or not, elitist perspectives that argue class hierarchies are natural and inevitable, even necessary, for a functional society.

Given this, it is not surprising that faculty also experience students who articulate negative stereotypes of the working class or those in poverty. One reported, "Most have little to no knowledge about poverty in America so when they speak or write about a population considered to be poverty level, they speak using stereotypes, [and] unconscious bias comes through in their writing and speaking." Another put it more bluntly: "[students believe] people living in poverty are more likely to be dangerous/violent, bad parents, also drug users, etc." These views echo common, often racialized, discourses in the US that posit the poor as the sole cause of their own poverty—due to self-perpetuating "cultures of poverty" (Lewis, 1966), familial dysfunctions (Moynihan, 1965), or other theories that "blame the victim" (Ryan, 1976). Here, those in poverty or the working class exist as an Other defined by incivility, immorality, criminality, or worse, thus representing an "undeserving poor" (Katz, 1989; Loughnan et al., 2014), obviating the need for any class critique of poverty or inequality.

Respondents also stated that their students express a variety of typical, but more minor, misunderstandings of class. For instance, several claimed that their students often regard income as the defining feature of one's class position, neglecting wealth, capital, and political power as constitutive of class. Similarly, students' preexisting notions of class are absent a conscious understanding of cultural dimensions such as status (the prestige of, say, professional occupations or conspicuous forms of consumption), "social capital" (one's class-based social networks and institutional resources), or "cultural capital" (one's class-based knowledge, education, or habits of mind) (Bourdieu, 1985). Consequently, students often are not adept at seeing the nuances of class in everyday life, despite its ubiquity, including their own class standing. One particularly striking issue was students' difficulties understanding their *own* class positions, tending to default to normative assumptions about themselves as middle class. In the words of one faculty member, "Most students think they are 'middle class' even though by many objective standards they come from the top 10-20 percent."

The causes of these limited notions of class may be many—(internalized) efforts to pass as middle class, liberal political strategies of appealing to a loosely defined "middle class" (e.g., Greenberg, 1996), meritocratic ideologies about joining the middle class, et cetera. However, multiple instructors mentioned that this is due to most students coming from the professional middle class and having little experience with members of other classes. In the words of one respondent, Most... students seem to have little direct experience with lower income classes. They very rarely understand rural America. Their conception of urban areas is very much based on stereotypes. Based on empirical survey questions I administer anonymously, I find that most students are highly supportive of capitalism and much less supportive of redistribution. In short, they just don't seem to have much empathy for people who they don't have experience with and therefore can't understand.

Insular class-based social networks have long been a feature of the American class system, despite the persistence of rags-to-riches myths (e.g., Horatio Alger) that would posit more cross-class mobility and interaction (Domhoff, 2013). Given that students in U.S. higher education tend to come disproportionally from the middle or upper classes and perpetuate these networks to secure their class status, this explanation makes sense. More, with class polarization growing, students' class insularity is likely to be more common.

The literature on teaching class echoes this explanation, suggesting that more privileged students have little frame of reference for life outside their own class, and thus presume their experiences are more normal and

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ubiquitous than they are. Several instructors claimed more privileged students possess a "class blindness" (like "race blindness," e.g., Williams, 1998), unable or unwilling to see class differences at all. Worse, as Manning, Rich, and Price (1997) suggest, they can "tend to perceive [sociological concepts of stratification] as simply the agenda of those 'other' oppressed groups (identity politics) or 'left-wing' critics" (pp. 15-16). This is doubly difficult in courses focused on contexts outside the US about which there is even less student experience or understanding. Even for those students who recognize some of the oppressive impacts of class (e.g., homelessness), their insular experiences and meritocratic ideals can lead them to paternalistic, elite-driven solutions (e.g., charitable giving), ones that do not threaten the redistribution of their wealth or power. However, insularity and polarization may not be as common in higher education settings with greater proportions of working-class students, such as community colleges or regional state institutions (e.g., Wruck, 2018).

Challenge 2: Teaching Students from Different Class Backgrounds

The second most common challenge respondents noted was how to teach students of both greater and lesser class privilege simultaneously. Faculty noted how students in their classrooms are more diverse than in the past, and that this creates two different challenges. The first is the curiosity students express about social class as they notice class differences among their peers' life experiences. One respondent explained, "many [students]… are curious about why others experience poverty, and many students are thinking through how issues of inequality operate and what to do about them." Instructors in the learning community echoed this by sharing anecdotes about how students, particularly lower income students, are deeply interested in the ways class manifests on campus in conspicuous consumption (e.g., dress, cars, vacations), work experiences, levels of social activity (lower income students cite less active social lives), stratified social networking (e.g., Greek systems, see Sander, 2013; Soria & Bultmann, 2014), student-staff relations, and levels of in-class participation (lower income students cite less comfort with engagement) (see also Cooke et al., 2007). Jack (2019) found that students with multiple class, race, and other disadvantages often retreat and become socially isolated in response to the

culture shocks of an elite college environment.

These and other class matters are of special interest to those students of lower income who are facing difficulties of belonging, often triggering imposter syndrome (Redd, 2016) or potentially traitor syndrome, the fear of betraying their origins as they assimilate to life among the privileged. Class may be invisible to many behind obfuscating ideologies, but it is particularly obvious to those students with less privilege, and they often are eager to learn more (Piston, 2018). In this way, increasing classroom diversity is helping to make at least some students more aware of differences, open to critical perspectives, and more savvy about class analyses (see also Phillips, 2014).

Another effect of a more diverse classroom is that students from different class backgrounds have more occasions to challenge one another, creating opportunities for cross-class conflict. This is not uncommon as students with diverse experiences discuss class ideology, policy, or culture refracted through their own understandings, often with disagreements; and when students experience microaggressions or insensitivities in their peers' views, emotional responses can occur (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015). For instance, instructors in the learning community shared anecdotes about the offense that less privileged students take to assertions of meritocratic ideology, implying that their class standing is due to a lack of effort and ability. Such anxieties and frustrations are not limited to less privileged students, however, especially when privileged students experience fears of judgment and dismissal for, say, what others may regard as unearned wealth. While a long lineage of pedagogues from Socrates to Dewey and beyond (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2016) regard conflict as necessary for the growth of critical thinking, conflict can be unproductive when it is reactionary. This is what the respondents in our survey and learning community frequently feared, creating classrooms that may be disengaged, or worse, traumatic.

Conversely, faculty expressed frustration at the ways students—particularly first generation or low-income students—are reluctant to debate or challenge their peers at all, hiding their identities especially when fears of social rejection, or profound resentments, are piqued. As one faculty member put it, "students… are wary to share their class experiences because it's such a

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clear divide on campus." Another faculty was fearful of "offending [students] who are sensitive about their class origins or who are status-anxious." Students of first-generation or lower income origins may be more reticent to disclose their experiences or identity, particularly on campuses with high proportions of privileged students (Stephens et al., 2014). Existing literature suggests that the classroom participation of first-generation or lower income students may indeed be diminished due to a lack of belonging and voice, as well as stereotype threat (Spencer & Castano, 2007), which in turn can lead to performance and persistence gaps (Havlik et al., 2017).

Challenge 3: Adopting an Intersectional Approach When Teaching Class

The third most common challenge was that of teaching intersectionality. Intersectionality is a model for identifying the ways multiple forces of exploitation and oppression converge to make some populations—e.g., African American women, or working-class LGBT youth—particularly vulnerable (Crenshaw, 1988). More, in our lived realities class is never isolated from other differences, since as a material and cultural force it has given historical shape to differences such as race and gender—from practices of redlining to domesticity—while race and gender have further instantiated class identities and structures in social life. One instructor stated, "there is a need to remind [students] how class always stands in relation to other identificatory markers and boundaries such as race, gender, etc." Indeed, several instructors reported that "intersectionality" is an organizing principle of their syllabi and essential to their teaching precisely because it presents so many profound challenges for students.

First, respondents discussed how conceptually difficult it is to provide clear-minded intersectional analysis. Analyzing the impacts of multiple dimensions of power on a micro-level (individual or small group), much less a macro-level (national or transnational processes), requires more information than may be available in one discipline. Combining multiple levels of structural analysis across varying contexts—cultural, economic, political—is conceptually tricky when students have limited social literacy. Faculty also may have difficulties since it requires that they traverse multiple disciplines and attend to material and cultural phenomena simultaneously. These gaps of knowledge

lead to speculation; or worse, it can invite the projection of student preconceptions onto the object of analysis. Further, enjoining students in simultaneous analysis of race, gender, or other differences invites exponentially more preconceptions and biases to resolve.

For example, let's take intersectional analyses of race and class. As one instructor noted, "maybe highest on the list is how to talk about class and race separately while also acknowledging that they converge." One difficulty with race and class is that, as one respondent put it, students come to our courses primed to think about the relevance of race (and gender) more than class: "[Students have] little preparation for the topic [class] in school or society. Issues of gender and race are more commonly studied." Indeed, race is such a primary organizing principle of our social history and so salient a feature of everyday life that students (if not faculty) can slip from class to racial categories with little consciousness, confusing or even conflating class with race, for instance regarding class inequality as an artifact of racial discrimination alone and not a racialized capitalism with multiple effects on inequality across racial groups (see also Croll, 2018; Haider, 2018).

At other times, there may be a displacement of attention from one difference by another, from class to race, for instance. This may occur because prioritizing one issue—for example, class—as more central to their experience may be a way for students to claim an identity or worldview. At still other times, privileging one difference may be an effort to escape or evade discomfort with the other. There are surely students who use discussions of class to avoid those around race, gender, or other differences. For some, however, the inverse is true because class issues may be threatening, since class critique can confound ideologies, provoke identity crises, derail career plans, trigger waves of guilt and anger, and prompt confrontations. It can directly challenge students' beliefs in a just world and dispel myths of "the American Dream," raising doubts and fears about the existing social order. Class critique can be profoundly unsettling, living up to Marx's aspirations of a "ruthless criticism of all that exists" (1843). A refined understanding of class-race intersections, for example, is not possible without a rigorous investigation of both in a variety of contexts, and structural or historical analysis.

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Findings: Pedagogical Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges of Teaching Class

Despite the difficulties posed by these challenges, respondents consistently saw opportunities to deepen their students' critical consciousness of class, primarily through their pedagogical approaches. Following Bandy, Harbin, and Thurber (2021), we group these pedagogical choices into two categories: cognitive and affective. Cognitive strategies aim to address conceptual gaps in students' understanding of topics related to class largely through the selection of course content. Affective strategies endeavor to hone students' experiential, applied, and sometimes interpersonal exploration of class as it manifests in everyday life, developing skills of empathy, compassion, conflict negotiation, in addition to reflections on (inter)personal values and ethics. Below, we discuss in greater detail these cognitive and affective approaches to teaching class using the voices and experiences of participants in our study and supplement this discussion with insights gained from existing research on teaching and learning.

Cognitive Strategies for Teaching Class

First, when incorporating cognitive strategies for teaching class, participants in our study typically did so using **carefully curated content**: literature, films, case studies, and current events that engage students in a critical study of class and capitalism. For instance, some faculty members described curating content that surveys a wide variety of theories, literatures, histories, policies, and most of all, empirical social scientific research, case studies, and first-person narratives about class and its production in everyday life. Others discussed designing syllabi that survey the U.S. or international class structure by using ethnographic and other studies.

Several faculty members also referenced specific authors or texts that touch on economic, political, or cultural dimensions of class—e.g., studies of poverty or labor market networks—that they use to question class-based preconceptions grounded in prevalent political and cultural ideologies. For instance, one faculty member explained that they used the book *The Politics of Resentment* (Cramer, 2016), which explores the rural resentment of whites in Wisconsin through a series of qualitative interviews. They described pairing this reading with another book, *Why Americans Hate Welfare* (Gilens,

1999), to make visible the intersection of race and class for students. The instructor further explained, "I try to incorporate lectures that bring up things students may have never thought about before—such as the fact that there are next to no working-class members of Congress. We talk about why that is and why it matters. Mostly, I just try to expose them to readings that may challenge their preconceived notions."

This content-based focus on students' intellectual development is a primary method for meeting *all* of the above challenges of teaching class. Faculty in the learning community were especially convinced that when readings are well-chosen and -organized—engaging students in critical narrative, empirical research, and rigorous theoretical analysis—they can effectively challenge preconceptions and insular experiences while empowering students to develop skills of critical structural, multi-disciplinary, and intersectional analyses of class and capitalism. This is particularly so when predominantly privileged students are exposed to the lives of those in poverty or working classes through first-person autobiographical narratives (Kirby, 2021; Parker & Howard, 2009).

The literature on teaching and learning highlights the critical role that course content plays in challenging student preconceptions. Intellectual growth often begins with carefully chosen readings, films, or video that make possible expansive and complicated definitions of class as lived in a variety of social contexts internationally (e.g., APA, 2018; Kirby, 2021; Williams & Melchiori, 2013). Indeed, the primary work of critical thought for any subject occurs through the engagement with existing scholarly research and the critical narratives they produce, so that existing conceptions may be challenged, informed, and developed. Authors such as Leistyna and Mollen (2008) further champion the use of film to enable students to critically engage in the study of audio/visual popular culture, uncovering diverse attitudes about class across student identities, generating debate about how pop culture reinforces or challenges class ideology, and encouraging interdisciplinarity.

Second, in both the faculty survey and learning community discussions, faculty members also referred to **collaborative learning strategies** they used to facilitate student learning. The participants most often used semi-

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structured discussions of student reactions, applications, and analyses of the readings. For the most part, they incorporated exercises that encouraged students to engage one another in open inquiry. For instance, one faculty member explained that they "emphasize the scientific process and [that] the goal of the class [is] to understand aspects of society better and more empirically." Rather than quickly pivoting to the course material, this instructor begins by asking students how they believe class works. Using student responses, they build a model on the board and identify areas where students might derive testable hypotheses. The instructor then uses the course materials as opportunities to test and refine the students' model week by week, challenging and refining it along the way. In their own words, they found this approach useful because the main conclusions of the course "are 1) arrived at by the students' own observations and ideas, and 2) objective and scientific—thus, not seen as an ideologically motivated attack on them or their friends and family." This method lets students address their preconceptions directly, enabling meta-cognitive evaluations of their mental models via rigorous analysis via empirical scholarship. This said, exploring class experiences need not be done purely through empirical social sciences; indeed, several instructors argued that first- or third-person narratives of class relations in testimonials and biographies are powerful tools in helping students question the ways they make meaning of class in their lives. As one instructor explained, "I've started to use more biographical materials for unpacking tensions in literary work, that can then disclose an experience of class."

Instructors in our study also discussed using collaborative case-based analysis of class as it manifests in everyday life, for instance in students' secondary schools—social cliques, zoning, admissions (e.g., Reay et al., 2001), labor market networks, or other class-laden aspects of education. This helps students to compare experiences and thus see class relations in their everyday world as they apply class analysis to salient personal experience. Similarly, faculty described how family institutions often prove to be useful objects of analysis because they can help students to develop better understandings of the cultural and economic bases of class position, or inter- and intra-generational mobility, for example. Beyond family and school,

instructors mentioned using discussions of consumer culture and advertising as ways to lead students to more nuanced understandings of class in a capitalist society, particularly the role of cultural capital and consumerism in reproducing or challenging class hierarchies (see also Edwards, 2018). Lastly, faculty members explained how they use current events to spark curiosity and develop analysis of the way that class is woven into our economic and social structure, including housing crises, student indebtedness, environmental injustices, mass incarceration, and social movements. Of course, existing scholarship on teaching and learning suggests that when done well collaborative learning strategies like these enable effective learning (Lage et al., 2000; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016) enhancing memory, cognitive development, analysis, synthesis, and problem solving, not to mention students' social skills—all elemental to teaching issues of difference.

Affective Strategies for Teaching Class

A less frequent but still common set of strategies used by participants in our study were those focusing on students' affective development. Instructors expressed a pedagogical focus on fostering class self-awareness and empathy, with the goals of helping students find greater empowerment of, and compassion towards, themselves and others. When done well, instructors found that students may overcome many of the challenges of understanding class—constrained self-awareness, insular class experiences, individualist worldviews, stereotypical understandings of different class groups, and limited intersectional analysis of class with other differences. Yet they may also grow emotionally as well, developing awareness of their attitudes and emotions surrounding class issues, including investments in privilege, experiences of marginalization, alienation, fears of falling (Ehrenreich, 2020), prejudices, empathy for others, conflict negotiation, and social values, to name a few (e.g., Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

To realize these goals, instructors principally adopted a range of **reflective assignments and activities**. Some incorporated personal reflection in the form of class discussions and writing assignments, both designed around student experiences of class. Most often, faculty deployed autobiographical assignments such as an essay, or more commonly, journal reflections (including audio/

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video formats) in which students interrogated personal experience with course concepts. One faculty member explained that simple subjects like students' experiences with high school cliques, food, or distant family can be the subject of complex reflections on class identity and conflict. The literature on teaching class confirms the usefulness of reflection exercises that involve tests of bias, debates about the ideals of "The American Dream," or experiences of oppression through photo-voice projects (e.g., APA, 2018). Indeed, class autobiographies afford students profound opportunities to clarify the influence of class in their lives, integrating personal experiences with social history and critique (the "sociological imagination" [Mills, 1959]), and thereby empowering personal growth and social agency (Williams & Melchiori, 2013). Although this may be beneficial to students of any class background, this personalized, experiential way of knowing is a "signature genre" of working-class narratives (Linkon, 2021) and will likely be more supportive of working-class and lower-income students. This is likely, not only to grant these students much needed voice, enhancing belonging and performance (e.g., Green, 2003), but also to transform our institutions by moving class critique to their centers (Kirby, 2021).

To **model critical self-reflection**, instructors in the learning community emphasized their need to share stories of their own class experiences and identity—when it is safe to do so. Similar to Williams (2016), who described concluding her initial class meeting of her courses with an introductory monologue to establish the tone of "radical honesty," instructors in our study discussed how modeling reflexivity promotes greater student engagement, trust, and openness to class critique (see also Docka-Filipek, 2018; Marshall & Leondar-Wright, 2018). Instructors' personal narratives can prove useful for students as a model of unflinching, introspective class analysis about, for example, their class origins and struggles, the labor relations of the academy, issues of class mobility, intersectional subjectivity, or the complexities of "contradictory class locations" (a term Wright [1985] uses for, among others, "semi-autonomous employees" such as faculty who possess significant autonomy but no productive capital).

A common tool of promoting empathy, as well as ways to productively understand how class outrage or sorrow is refracted through other differences, is to provide readings and exercises that **encourage intersectional analysis** of social forces as they collide in the experiences of groups—e.g., working class gay men of color. This helps students tease out the social forces of race, class, gender, sexuality, and others as they overlap, interact, and contradict one another in various contexts, shaping unique subcultures and issues of injustice. Students also can develop critiques of class relations and power by studying the experiences of those with multiple, intersecting forms of privilege, for example in studies of predominantly white male elite social networks. Studying privileged groups, as merely one specific set of experiences, also has the advantage of helping students to deconstruct the intersectional hegemonies of class, race, gender, and other forms of power (Dhamoon, 2010) while deepening understandings of capitalist class systems.

Whatever the privilege or oppression of groups studied, intersectional analysis of structural or social forces also can confound stereotypes and open opportunities for greater empathy. For example, having students reckon with the existence of upper-class African Americans, or conversely working-class whites or Asian Americans, may help dispel racialized class stereotypes while also deepening understandings of how class and race are distinct yet overlapping (e.g., Michaels, 2018). As another example, intersectional teaching can help students move beyond two-dimensional stereotypes of the Other as an object of pity or paternalism. As one of our respondents colorfully puts it, "what rises to the top for me is how to… emphasize that [poverty] is a problem *while also* not making it seem like anyone who lives in poverty has a shit life and those of us who don't live in poverty should feel sorry and/or 'save' them [original emphasis]."

A few instructors mentioned the ways that **case studies and simulations** are critical to their teaching, mostly well-informed vignettes that can be the basis of group discussions and debates that support student understandings of lived class relations. Some even used the university itself as a site of analysis, uniting personal reflection with structural critiques of higher education's

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function in capitalism (see also Archer et al., 2003; Brewer, 2018). Yet the literature on teaching class goes further to explore a variety of simulations designed to create empathy. One example are poverty simulations like that of the Missouri Community Action Network that focus on helping students understand the hardships, stresses, and traps experienced by people in poverty (MCAN, 2018). Another set of examples are games like Kirk McDermid's (2010) use of the Poker Market, a learning game that arranges students in different social roles denoted on cards. Each card, which can be traded or redistributed at different junctures, differs in levels of wealth that, in turn, constrain students' ability to trade. The game prompts debates about wealth distribution and thus leads students to see the connections between one's material wealth and one's interest in advocating policies and ideologies about class (McDermid, 2010). A variety of authors advocate for such games to help students see how class structures shape the distribution of wealth and life chances, as well as expand empathy for a variety of perspectives (APA 2018; Carreiro & Kapitulik, 2010; Hamilton, 2020; Peretz & Messner, 2013; Richards & Cumuso, 2015; Sandoz, 2016; Willis et al., 2005).

Finally, a few but dedicated members of the learning community were also champions of **service-learning or community engagement (SLCE)** projects. They pointed to the ways these assignments break down barriers of class insularity and promote less stereotypical understandings of class groups, and thus have great power in facilitating intellectual, social, and emotional learning. They echoed existing scholarship in this sentiment, that requiring students to observe, work with, and learn from community members of different class backgrounds—when done well—builds empathy, cooperative social skills, in addition to critical class analysis of capitalism in everyday life (Williams & Melchiori, 2013). Further, service learning can involve collaborative research and problem-solving that supports students' affective development via civic and leadership skills, as well as interpersonal competencies, furthering both a sense of effectiveness and commitment in public life that has long-term benefits for students, communities, and universities (Eyler et al., 1997; Straus & Eckenrode, 2014).

However, learning community participants emphasized how SLCE projects work best when they are well-integrated with course materials, involve truly co-creative campus-community partnerships, and eliminate potential harms to communities (see also Eyler et al.,

1997). One major risk worth noting is inadvertently creating assignments that ask students to treat others' class experiences as exotic or token, offer no mutuality or reciprocal benefit for community partners, or teach students a form of exploitative tourism or voyeurism (e.g., Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). Noting risks like these, the faculty in our survey shared a common emphasis on using such research with depth, breadth, and ethical purpose to empower students, if not also community members, in attenuating the inequalities and injustices of class. This emphasis on the development of students' commitments to social engagement has long been a focus of those who teach class (e.g., Manning et al., 1997).

By far the most common approach among participants in our study (including all the survey respondents) was implementing cognitive strategies for teaching class such as the careful selection of readings and films designed to correct student preconceptions and deepen their understanding of class formations under capitalism. Fewer participants (including 15 of the 29 survey respondents) focused on affective strategies. It is worth noting that several strategies of affective development went unmentioned at all. Respondents and learning community participants did not focus much on the affective learning possible through cross-class dialogue or conflict resolution in their classrooms. Despite helping students think about class in their own lives in individual assignments written for instructors alone, they shied from strategies that would turn the classroom into a cross-class dialogue about differing class identities, privilege/marginalization, and a transformation of conflict towards reconciliation.

Further, despite expressing hope that students would use class assignments to find moral commitments to diminish class inequality on campus or in the public sphere, they were averse to dialogues that might be misunderstood as moralizing or activist, favoring more empirical or analytical to discussions of class action. What becomes clear, therefore, is that, while instructors in the study seemed to recognize that cognitive and affective learning are mutually interdependent, necessitating holistic pedagogies, they stopped short of those that would encourage students to leverage personal experiences and conflicts around class identity. This limits faculty or student abilities to model ways to resolve class conflict, engage in moral debates about class structure, and commit to social action on class issues on campus or beyond. This is certainly understandable given that instructors have reasonable fears about privacy and confidentiality, about

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how conflict could lead to emotional harm for students, and about how instructors are ill-equipped to assist students with challenging emotions and trauma. Further, despite cherished academic freedoms, the increasingly neoliberal governance of the academy as well as ongoing culture wars create a context in which instructors have legitimate trepidations about the repercussions they may face if students (Sethuraju et al., 2013) or administrators regard their work as activist.

While we feel these trepidations ourselves in our own teaching, we also must acknowledge that judicious and well-planned efforts to engage students in dialogue about their class experiences and values can open new opportunities for student transformation intellectually, as well as socially and emotionally. According to Bandy, Harbin, and Thurber (2021), when teaching on topics related to difference instructors can limit their students' learning if they do not attend to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of students' development, since each enhances the other (118). Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) go so far as to argue that, for any subject, "[w]hen we educators fail to appreciate the importance of students' emotions, we fail to appreciate a critical force in students' learning. One could argue, in fact, that we fail to appreciate the very reason that students learn at all" (p. 9). Indeed, when done well via honed strategies of, for example, Intergroup Dialogue (Dessel et al., 2006; Fisher & Checkoway, 2011; Wayne, 2008-), culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 2014), or conflict transformation practices (Reimann, 2004), a more affectively intentional discussion of class can offer students greater safety, motivation, and insight. There is a growing literature of critical pedagogies and inclusive practices that can aid in fostering productive interpersonal dialogues around class, or other differences (Addy et al., 2022). These strategies enhance, not only student intellectual growth opportunities, but also moral and emotional clarity, attitudinal shifts, and the empowerment that students so often crave as they confront the social problems of class and capital in everyday life.

Conclusion

The preceding points to a not-so-surprising conclusion: that U.S. students struggle to understand the complexities and problems of class in modern society, and that educators, while innovative in using a variety of strategies to promote cognitive and affective development around class, also struggle to find the best ways to deepen students' class awareness and help them draw lessons for their future lives. Students, despite their curiosities and profound insights born of the contradictions of class they witness in everyday life, often arrive in our classrooms hindered in their understanding by insular privileges, classist prejudices, and limited literacy of difference, intersectionality, and social structures of power. Instructors, for our part, bring to the classroom much expertise in our disciplines and in teaching, and with it many skills of course planning, content selection, critical reflection, and collaborative education that serve to engage and empower. Through our survey and learning community participants we have learned that instructors deploy creative, holistic methods of teaching social class.

Yet, most of those who teach issues of class have not fully embraced pedagogies that research suggests are likely to generate the greatest affective development, such as in-class simulations, community engagement projects, or interpersonal dialogue among students about lived class identities. This can leave students and educators alike struggling to comprehend the full web of class relations that have entangled their lives, not to mention how they may work to diminish class inequalities on our campuses and in our society. Too often our universities are of little assistance in this endeavor because of limited curricular or institutional space for such discussions, often aided by neoliberal orientations that eschew class critique and academic activism in favor of various moderate or conservative visions of the university.

Still, in these challenges come opportunities. If we believe that our courses can either empower or disempower students' class consciousness, then we must enable not only their intellectual appreciation of what class is, but also the full range of consequences class systems have on their identities and life chances. To do this requires a radical honesty and reflexivity of educators and students alike as they examine the complexities of class in their lives and their roles in reproducing it, individually and collectively. As we develop collaborative learning partnerships with one another and with communities off campus, especially about class structure and policy, we can improve students' abilities to discern their individual *and* collective strategies for diminishing

inequalities and challenging class-based social systems. If we are to teach students about class so they may be more effective citizens, then student work needs to not simply analyze class in abstract intellectual terms, but in its complex, affective, and moral realities as lived. This demands that we as educators help empower students to embrace a radical honesty about themselves and the world in which they find themselves, developing an agency that is personally and socially transformative.

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